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ABSTRACT

A system of different types of tasks can be used to help language learners achieve their learning goals, which may include learning of: discrete language items (sounds, vocabulary, grammatical constructions); content or ideas of the subject studied (geography, literature, mathematics, cultural understanding); language skills (listening, writing, fluency, strategies for coping with language difficulties); and organization of discourse. Four basic task types are useful. Experience tasks are those within the realm of the learner's previous experience, allowing him to focus attention on learning goals. Preparation for these tasks may include providing relevant experience. Shared tasks are those that may be difficult for one learner to tackle alone but can be completed successfully by two or more working cooperatively. Planning should include consideration of how task elements will be distributed. Guided tasks provide support for the learner while he accomplishes them, narrowing the scope of the task and allowing for sequencing of instruction. Such tasks offer a high degree of success. Independent tasks require the learner to work alone without planned help. Such tasks should provide reasonable challenge and be realistic. When teachers use this system of tasks, they have access to a wide range of instructional possibilities that help learners gain mastery. (MSE)

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A SYSTEM OF TASKS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

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A SYSTEM OF TASKS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

Paul Nation

This paper looks at learning goals for learners of another language and describes a system for reaching these goals. The system is based on the idea that language learning like most learning involves learners working on tasks that require them to cope with items or skills that are new to them or that they have only partly mastered (Doyle, 1979, 1983). The way that they are helped to cope with the tasks will have a major effect on the kind of learning that occurs.

Imagine that a teacher wishes to help learners in her class improve their writing skills. To do this she will get them to work on writing tasks that will take them beyond their present level of proficiency. But to make sure that the learners are successful in doing the tasks, she may have to provide some help. There are several ways in which she could do this.

(1) She could think of a topic that the learners are very familiar with, such as a recent exciting event. She then gets the learners talking about the event so that the ideas and their organisation are clear and so that the learners have an oral command of the language needed to describe the event. When all this previous knowledge has been stimulated, the learners are then told to put it in writing. Because the ideas, organisation and necessary language are all familiar to them, the learners have only to concentrate on turning these ideas into a written form.

(2) The teacher could think of a topic and then put the learners into groups of three or four. Each group has to plan and produce one piece of writing. By helping each other, the learners in each group are able to produce a piece of writing that is better than what any of them could have produced by working alone.

(3) The teacher finds or makes a guided composition exercise, such as a series of pictures with accompanying questions and language items.

(4) The teacher chooses a topic and then lets the learners get on with their writing. They may ask for help if they need it, but they are mainly left to work independently.

These four kinds of tasks are called experience tasks, shared tasks, guided tasks, and independent tasks.

One way to look at these types of tasks is to see their job as dealing with the

gap which exists between learners' present knowledge and the demands of the learning task. Experience tasks try to narrow the gap as much as possible by using or developing learners' previous experience. Shared tasks try to get learners to help each other cross the gap. Guided tasks try to bridge the gap by providing the support of exercises and focused guidance. Independent tasks leave learners to rely on their own resources.

Let us now look at learning goals before looking at the types of tasks in more detail.

LEARNING GOALS

Language learning techniques are used to reach learning goals. These goals can include learning of (1) language items such as sounds, vocabulary and grammatical constructions, (2) the content or ideas of the subject being studied such as geography, English literature, mathematics, or cross-cultural understanding, (3) language skills such as listening, writing, fluency in using known items, and strategies for coping with language difficulties, and (4) the organisation of discourse such as rhetorical features and semantic constituents. Table 1 elaborates these areas.

General goals	Specific goals
Language items (L)	pronunciation vocabulary grammatical constructions
Ideas (content) (I)	
Skills (S)	accuracy fluency strategies process skills or subskills
Text (discourse) (T)	text schemata or topic type scales

Table 1 Learning Goals

A more detailed elaboration of some of these areas can be found in Munby's (1978, pp. 176-184) taxonomy of language skills.

The use of language teaching techniques is justified to the extent that they achieve learning goals. This even applies to techniques that are used for fun to give the learners a break, because there are many language teaching techniques that are great fun and achieve very useful learning goals.

A major problem with learning goals is that the goal of a technique can change depending on how the technique is used. For example, if the ***listen and draw*** technique presents new vocabulary in a helpful context, it then has a language goal. If it does not contain new language items, is presented at an easy speed and requires learners to draw something associated with a new concept, it has a content goal. If it uses familiar language but is presented quite quickly, it has a skill goal. The purpose of the description of the learning goal however is to make teachers conscious of why they are using a particular technique.

Let us now look at experience, shared, guided and independent tasks in detail.

EXPERIENCE TASKS

A very effective way of making a task easier is to make sure that the learners are familiar with as many parts of it as possible. This has several effects. First, it makes sure that learners are not overloaded by having to think about several different things at the same time. Second, it allows the learners the chance to concentrate on the part of the task that they need to learn. Third, it helps the learners perform a normal language activity in a normal way with a high chance of success.

Bringing Tasks within the Learners' Experience

One of the most common examples of an experience task in foreign language learning is the use of simplified reading books, which are sometimes called graded readers. Once learners have a vocabulary of three hundred words or more, they should be able to read Stage 1 graded readers because these are written within that vocabulary level. Normally, such learners would not be able to read books written in English because unsimplified texts would be far too difficult for them. However, because Stage 1 graded readers use vocabulary that is familiar to the learners, use familiar sentence patterns, and involve simple types of stories, elementary learners are able to read the Stage 1 reader without too much difficulty and with a feeling of success.

Ways of bringing the task within the learners' experience		Typical procedures for reading activities
Control through selection or simplification	L	A reading or listening text is written within a controlled vocabulary and a controlled list of structures
	I	Learners describe their experience to the teacher who writes it to become the learners' reading texts
	S	The learners read texts which are closely based on the texts they read in their first language
	T	The teacher writes informative science texts as stories or personal accounts
Recall or sharing personal experience	L	The learners label diagrams and pictures based on the text they will read
	I	The learners are asked to predict what will occur in a text after they know the topic of the text
	S	The learners discuss how they take notes and summarise when they read in their first language
	T	The learners share their predictions of which kinds of information will occur in what order in the text
Preteaching	L	The teacher explains vocabulary that will occur in the reading text
	I	The learners collect and display pictures and articles relating to the topic of the text
	S	The learners do guided exercises or first language reading activities to develop the needed reading skills
	T	The learners are helped with the discourse analysis of a text of the same topic type as the text they will read

Table 2 Bringing Reading Tasks within the Learners' Experience

The task of reading a graded reader is made easier because the writer of the graded reader has brought many of the parts of the task within the learners' experience.

Here is another way of doing this which is often used in New Zealand primary schools. The teacher sits with a learner who has just drawn a picture. The learner tells the teacher the story of the picture and the teacher writes down the learner's words. This story then becomes the learner's reading text. It is not difficult for the learner to read because the language, the ideas in the story, and the sequence of ideas in the story are all within the learner's experience. The unfamiliar part of the task, which is also the learning goal of the activity, is the decoding of the written words.

There are several ways of presenting or controlling a task so that much of it is within the learners' experience.

Providing Learners with the Experience to do a Task

If learners do not have enough experience to do a task, then either the task can be changed so that it is brought within their experience, or the learners can be provided with the experience which will help them do the task. A common way of providing learners with experience is to take them on a visit or field trip. For example, the teacher may take the class to a fire station. While they are there, they find out as much as they can about the fire station. They may even have a set of questions to answer. After the visit the writing task should be easier because the learners have experienced the ideas that they will write about, they have used or heard the language items that they need in the writing task, and they can choose how they will organise the writing. Their only difficulty should be putting the ideas into a written form and this is probably the learning goal for the task.

A more formal way of providing learners with experience to do a task is by preteaching. For example, before the learners read a text, the teacher can teach them the vocabulary they will need, can give them practice in finding the main idea, or can get them to study some of the ideas that will occur in the text.

Checking Experience Tasks

When using experience tasks for language teaching, it is useful to have a way of checking to see what parts of the task are within the learners' experience and what part of the task is being focused on as the learning goal. In the section on goals we have looked at four sets of goals - Language item goals; Idea or content goals; Skill goals; and Text or discourse goals. The mnemonic LIST can

be used to remember these goals. A useful rule to follow is that any experience task should have only one of these goals and the other three should already be within the learners' experience. So, if the teacher wants the learners to master the ideas or content of a text, then the language items (vocabulary, grammar, language functions) should all be within the learners' experience. Similarly, if the learners have the goal of increasing their reading speed (a part of the reading skill), then the reading speed passages should be written in simple language, should deal with largely familiar ideas, and should be written with a familiar type of organisation ie as a simple narrative or a regular step by step description. ***Speed Reading*** by E Quinn and I S P Nation (1974) and ***Reading Faster*** by E Fry (1963) are two such courses. ***Speed Reading*** is written with a seven hundred word vocabulary and a limited range of sentence patterns using texts based on Asia and the Pacific. ***Reading Faster*** is written within a 2,000 word vocabulary and has predominantly African based texts.

Control through selection or simplification	Using simplified material Using carefully graded material Using learner produced material Using material based on first language material
Recall or sharing of previous experience	Discussions Gathering and sharing pictures Questioning peers
Preteaching or experiencing	Direct teaching of sounds, vocabulary, grammar, text types ... Visits and field trips Direct teaching of content

Table 3 Ways of Providing Experience

So, when checking an experience task, it is useful to ask these two questions.

(1) What is the learning goal of the task?
(2) Are the three other aspects of the task kept within the learners' experience?

Features of Experience Tasks

We have already looked at the most important feature of experience tasks, namely that several aspects of the task are kept within the learners' previous experience so that the learners can focus on the learning goal. Another feature that has already been mentioned is that the task is done in a manner that is similar to the way it would be done outside the classroom. That is, if the task is a writing task, then it will be done with the same kind of fluency that a native speaker or a highly proficient second language learner may do the task. This is possible because several aspects of the task are well within the learners' control. This feature of experience tasks makes them popular with teachers who favour a communicative approach to language learning, because it allows a message based fluency focus in tasks. A further feature of experience tasks is that each task usually provides quite a large quantity of activity. For example, most reading experience tasks involve the learner reading several sentences or paragraphs rather than having them struggle over a few sentences. Similarly, listening experience tasks involve listening to substantial amounts of spoken language. Krashen's (1981) input theory of learning fits easily into an experience approach.

There is a considerable amount of research into the various factors involved in experience tasks and their relative effects. These factors include the activation of schemata (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983), preteaching of vocabulary (Johnson, 1981), predicting from pictures (Omaggio, 1979), and having the learners pose questions which they will try to answer when they read (Taglieber, Johnson and Yarbrough, 1988).

SHARED TASKS

A task which is too difficult for an individual to do may be done successfully if a group does it. A well known example is group composition where three or four learners work together to produce a piece of writing that is superior to what any one of the group could do alone. There are several reasons why this happens, particularly in second language learning. First, although learners may be of roughly equal proficiency, they will certainly have learnt different aspects of the language. Second, although learners may know a particular language item, they may find difficulty in accessing it. The prompting and help of others may allow them to do this. Third, where groups contain learners of differing proficiency, there is the opportunity for more personalised teaching to occur with one learner working with another who needs help.

Many experience tasks and guided tasks can be done in a group, thus increasing the help that learners are given with the tasks.

Most shared tasks have the advantages of requiring little preparation by the

teacher, reducing the teacher's supervision and marking load, and encouraging the learners to see each other as a learning resource.

Arranging Shared Tasks

Shared tasks are best set up by considering how the information and input needed to do the task is distributed among the learners in each group. Table 4 lists the possibilities.

Type of arrangement	Information distribution	Example
Cooperating	The learners have equal access to the same material	Group composition
Combining	The information is spread among the learners so that each learner has unique essential information	Strip story
Superior-inferior	One learner acts as a teacher or resource for the others. This learner has all the information	Passage reconstruction
Individual	All learners have the same information but use a different part	Say it!

Table 4 Types of Shared Tasks

The principles and applications of group work are described in more detail in Nation (1989).

GUIDED TASKS

Most coursebooks make tasks easier by using exercises that carefully guide the learners. This usually has the effect of narrowing the task that the learners have to do. For example, guided composition exercises such as picture composition provide the ideas that the learners will write about. The exercises often provide needed vocabulary and structures and determine how the piece of writing will be organised. The learners' job is to compose the sentences that make up the composition. Guided tasks provide a lot of support for the learners ***while*** they do the task. This has several effects.

(1) First, as we have seen, the task is narrowed. That is, the learners only do a part of the work that would normally be required in such an activity. This is good if that part of the task is worth focusing on and helps learners achieve a useful learning goal. It is not good if the narrowed task results in learners doing things that bear little relation to the normal wider task. Substitution exercises were often criticised for this reason.

(2) A second effect of the support given during guided tasks is that it allows grading and sequencing of tasks. Experience tasks require the teacher to be sensitive to learners' familiarity with parts of a task and to provide and stimulate previous experience where necessary. Guided tasks, on the other hand, are designed so that guidance is provided as a part of the activity. It does not have to be provided by the teacher. For this reason, most coursebooks for English language teaching contain a lot of guided tasks. For the same reason, teachers may be reluctant to make their own guided tasks because of the amount of skill and work that has to go into making them.

(3) A third effect of the support given during such tasks is the high degree of success expected. If learners make errors in guided tasks this is often seen as a result of a poorly made task, that is, the guidance was not sufficient.

Variety in Guided Tasks

Let us imagine that a teacher wants to give the class practice in understanding and giving directions. He has decided to use maps to help him do this.

(1) The teacher wants to give listening practice first so he uses a distinguishing

technique. He draws a simple map on the blackboard, and says a sentence, for example, "Turn to the right." Then he points to the map and by moving the pointer shows a turn to the right. The learners answer "the same". The teacher does this with several sentences. Sometimes the sentence is the same as the movement he shows on the map, sometimes it is different.

(2) To give further listening practice the teacher uses an identification technique. Using the same map on the board the teacher says a sentence, for example, "Take the second street on the left." After the teacher says the sentence a learner shows the movement on the map. When this is easy for the learners, the teacher speaks quickly or gives several directions and makes the learner wait a few seconds before the learner shows them all on the map.

(3) As a preparation for the learners saying the sentences, the teacher uses a completion technique. The teacher writes incomplete sentences on the blackboard. The teacher also marks a short journey corresponding to the incomplete sentences by looking at the journey on the map. The teacher can make this more challenging by letting the learners look at the journey on the map, and then rubbing the marked journey out before letting the learners complete the sentences.

(4) The teacher gives speaking practice by asking the learners to repeat sentences that he says. The technique can be made more interesting by asking the learners to listen to several sentences before they repeat them.

(5) The teacher arranges for more speaking practice by letting the learners work in pairs. The learners each have a copy of the same map. One learner marks a place on her map without the other learner seeing. The first learner, starting from a certain point on the map that both know, gives the learner directions on how to get to the place that has been marked. After the second learner has listened to the directions and followed them on his own map, he marks the place on his map. The two learners then compare their maps to see if the mark on each map is in the same place.

There are obviously many other guided tasks that can be made to give practice in commands using a map. Usually teachers only make use of a few of the techniques that they could use if they knew about them. By using the system described in Nation (1976) a teacher should be able to make most of the commonly used guided tasks and many others.

INDEPENDENT TASKS

Independent tasks require the learners to work alone without any planned help. Learners can work successfully on independent tasks when they have

developed some proficiency in the language and when they have command of helpful strategies. These strategies can develop from experience, shared or guided tasks. Let us look at learners faced with a difficult independent reading task, such as reading part of a science text. (1) The learners could read the text several times. During each re-reading, the learners have the experience gained from the previous readings. (2) The learners could ask the teacher or classmates for help when they need it. (3) The learners could guide their reading of the text by asking questions, or by using a notetaking or information transfer strategy.

A good independent task has the following features. (1) It provides a reasonable challenge ie it has some difficulty but the learners can see that with effort they can do it. (2) It is a task that learners are likely to face outside the classroom.

The difference between an experience task and an independent task lies in the control and preparation that goes into an experience task. Experience tasks are planned so that learners are faced with only one aspect of the task that is outside their previous experience. Independent tasks do not involve this degree of control and learners may be faced with several kinds of difficulty in the same task.

USING THE SYSTEM

The aim in describing this system of tasks is to make teachers aware of the possible approaches to dealing with the gap between the learners' knowledge and the knowledge required to do a task, and to make them aware of the very large number of activities that can be made to help learners. When teachers are able to think of a variety of ways of dealing with a problem, they can then choose the ones that will work best in their class. Let us end by applying the system.

Your learners need to read a text about land use in the Amazon basin. For several reasons this text will be difficult for them. There are new concepts to learn, there is new vocabulary, and the text is written in a rather academic way. What can the teacher do to help the learners with this task?

The first step is to think whether an experience task is feasible. Can the teacher bring the language, ideas, needed reading skills, or text organisation within the experience of the learners? For example, is it possible to bring the language within the learners' proficiency by preteaching vocabulary or discussing the topic before going on to the reading? Is it possible to bring the ideas within the learners' experience by getting them to collect pictures and short articles about the Amazon basin? Can the way the text is organised be outlined and explained to the learners? If these things are not possible or if more help is needed, then the teacher should look at making the reading a shared task.

The reading could be made into a shared task in several ways. The text could be divided up with each learner having a part of the text to read and explain to the others. Alternatively, pairs of learners could read and discuss the text together section by section. If this is not possible or further help is needed, guided help can be given.

Some of the simpler guided tasks could involve answering a detailed set of questions based on the text, completing a set of statements that summarise the text, filling in an information transfer grid based on a topic type analysis of the text (Franken, 1987), or labelling a diagrammatic representation of the text.

The distinctions made here between experience, shared and guided tasks are for ease of description and to make the range of possibilities clearer. Experience or guided tasks can be done in small groups as shared tasks, just as experience tasks may have some guided elements.

The purpose of this paper has been to describe a system that teachers can use to give them access to the large range of possibilities that are available to them when they try to close the gap between their learners' proficiency and the demands of the learning tasks facing them. The job of these tasks is to help learners gain mastery over the language, ideas, language skills and types of discourse that are the goals of their study.

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